
Book reviews

Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problems

Edited by J D G Evans, 264 pages, Cambridge, £9.95, Cambridge University Press, 1988

This is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature concerned with normative ethics and social philosophy. It is a collection of fifteen essays originating in papers given to the 1986 Royal Institute of Philosophy Conference held at Queen's University, Belfast.

Professor Evans provides a very brief introduction to the essays, the first seven of which address general issues in moral and social philosophy, including perhaps most interestingly, questions about the nature and methodology of applied or practical philosophy. The remaining eight papers discuss a wide range of topics: justice, conscience, leisure, work, surrogacy, drug testing, genetic engineering, and death. The general standard of the essays is professional and most are clear and direct in presentation.

Keith Graham and David Archard explore various aspects of the debate between individualism and communitarianism as this arose in the thought of Marx and as it reappears more recently in writings by Elster, MacIntyre and Rawls. Graham elaborates a case for identification with collective (class) interests as an alternative to morality in the area of thought about action, while Archard seeks to synthesise individuality and community through the idea that human beings realise their potential for full-personhood through participation in essentially social activities.

The essays by Stephen Clark, Onora O'Neill and Jonathan Gorman consider the relation between, on the one hand,

general and abstract philosophy and, on the other, the treatment (and hopefully the solution) of particular concrete problems for practice. Clark speaks eloquently of the need for, and the conditions of, moral understanding and O'Neill likewise emphasises the requirement for a more sophisticated and reflective manner of discriminating those situations in which appeal to general moral thinking is appropriate. Gorman meanwhile directs attention onto the older orthodoxy according to which philosophers should disavow any claim to moral authority. He considers this to rest upon a flawed account of knowledge and argues that a route to self-validating moral authority is available via an epistemology that is empiricist but holistic. Moral claims, like all others, may be tested against experience as meeting points between total theory and the world. Whether they pass the test is in part a matter of their adequacy in relation to other beliefs. But who may judge that? Only someone whose knowledge is general and synthetic, who is in some sense genuinely competent across the range of human disciplines and can assess the implications of moral beliefs for other parts of our understanding. The reflective skills of the philosopher uniquely qualify him for this role and such is the case for his claiming moral authority. This line of argument is not without plausibility but it is too briefly and loosely stated. Nonetheless an interesting possibility worth further discussion is presented.

The general reflection on philosophy and practice is continued in the following papers by James Brown and Barrie Paskins. The former considers two conceptions of applied ethics: the 'fruits-of-theory' and the 'engineering' models and argues in favour of the first towards a conclusion somewhat at odds with Gorman's, viz, that philosophers have a non-authoritative, co-operative role in general social reflection upon

values and policies. Paskins offers a wide-ranging examination of 'Philosophy in the nuclear age' again contrasting two views: this time 'Phoenix' and 'Useful' philosophy, ie, systematic abstract speculation engaged in for its own sake, as against applicable techniques of critical thinking. The proper role of the latter is to develop an 'anthropological ethic' – an account of the good kind of life for man given his nature and his physical, social and political environment.

The papers which follow are focussed on particular values and practices: Alan Ryan discusses exploitation and morality; Desmond Clarke assesses the comparative weight of individual conscience and external sources of moral guidance; Elizabeth Telfer analyses the co-relative notions of work and leisure; Bernard Cullen considers the idea of right to work; Bob Brecher evaluates arguments for the institutionalisation of surrogacy agreements based on the satisfaction of wants; Joseph Mahon considers the morality of drug testing in humans; Shyli Karin-Frank develops an account of the moral difficulties surrounding genetic engineering and David Lamb concludes the volume with a defence of a 'brain stem' account of death and a brief, though nonetheless useful, consideration of the implications of this view for doctors' duties and patients' rights.

The collection is evenly balanced between essays devoted to particular problems and those concerned with the general character of philosophy and practice. I have emphasised the latter because I believe – as clearly do many of the authors – that the time is right for a consideration of the presuppositions of 'applied philosophy' and an examination of the extent to which the treatment of specific issues depends upon more general moral and social views. Readers of this journal who are sympathetic to these ideas might best

begin the volume by looking at Bob Brecher's essay 'Surrogacy, liberal individualism and the moral climate'.

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Ethics – the Heart of Health Care

David Seedhouse, 154 pages,
John Wiley and Sons, Great Britain,
£8.95 pbk, 1988

This is a book in three parts. Part one concerns itself with the author's desire to demonstrate that there is a need for an increase in understanding of the ethical and moral nature of health care by those engaged in health care work. 'Work for health is a moral endeavour,' is the catch-phrase of this section of the book.

The rather more tortuous and long-winded second part of the book explores the author's understanding of attempts by a variety of philosophers, both classical and modern, to describe good health and health care. Whilst I found some chapters and parts of chapters in this section interesting, others were either over-simplistic or presented problems in such an idiosyncratic way as to render them unrecognisable.

The third part of the book describes the use of the 'ethical grid', a device presumably of the author's creation, which is proposed as a framework onto which health care professionals and others can hang concepts when engaged in ethical debate. He describes and illustrates its working using two examples. This third section may be of interest to those who teach medical ethics to medical students and other health care students and professionals.

Ethics – the Heart of Health care has the strong proselytising style of the recent convert. This is most apparent in the early sections but continues throughout. The book explores the variety of philosophical positions and approaches currently on offer and concludes that none of them are sufficient. These are the wilderness chapters. In the final section we are led, hesitantly, to the ethical grid which, despite some disclaimers, was for this book, the promised land.

This is a curate's egg of a book, too basic for the serious medical ethicist and too complex for the uninitiated. I guess it will find its mark with the youthful, zealous, middle ground. Others might find it worth dipping into.

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The Health Scandal: Your Health in Crisis

Vernon Coleman, 245 pages, London,
£12.95, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1988

Fourteen 'scandals' are listed as the symptoms, and the cause, of the decline in the health services and, according to Vernon Coleman, the cause of positive damage done to many hundreds and thousands of unwitting patients. Much of what he says has a grain of truth in it. There is, after all, something worrying about the BMA acting as the dispassionate spokesperson with the interests of the patients at heart when it is also the trades union of the doctors. But the same could undoubtedly be said for the Bar Council, or the Law Society, or for most other professional bodies.

There is a major question that hangs over all of them, and the area that should be most debated is that of openness to the public and general accountability, as well as the degree to which lay people are included in the decision-making processes, with their eyes always on the lookout for blatant self-interest.

That, of course, is a major ethical issue, but Coleman does not take it up because he is too concerned with having his own bash at the doctors, at what he regards, partly justifiably, as questionable prescribing habits, at the BMA's opposition to alternative medicine and, of course, its opposition to patients having access to their own medical records, a situation now at least partially reversed. But because he so loathes the BMA, he also attacks it for wanting more doctors, on the grounds, left unclear, that the public will not benefit from more doctors. The obvious question there is that it depends what the doctors are doing, whether they are working in arguably useless and certainly expensive hi-tech and experimental areas, or whether they are working in the field of chronic diseases of the elderly in an ageing population, or with the dying, or with the chronically sick, all much-underdoctored areas in the UK.

This book is too extreme to be much use, yet Coleman touches on some interesting areas. Joe Collier, himself a doctor, in his recently published book, *The Health Conspiracy – How Doctors, the Drug Industry and the Government Undermine our Health*, 1989, Century, 175 pages, £4.95) has covered many of the same areas. But his is an altogether more cogent and compelling presentation, all of which we can believe. Or most of it. Whether we will act upon the evidence is another matter altogether.

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